



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Australian Broadcasting
Corporation Amendment (Rural
and Regional Measures) Bill 2019**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 16 September 2019

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 16 September 2019 Page 3061 Questioner Speaker Conroy, Pat, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr CONROY (Shortland) (19:20): I rise to speak in opposition to this bill, which is nothing but a distraction from the coalition's ABC cuts and failures on regional media. Ostensibly, this bill is to facilitate the provision of broadcasting services by the ABC that meet and reflect the needs of rural and regional Australia and ensure that rural and regional communities are provided for in the functions of the corporation and through representation on the ABC board. In reality, this bill is nothing but window-dressing and will achieve nothing to improve rural and regional service provision. In fact, this bill is quite insulting to the rural and regional communities who've already lost so much through funding cuts by this government to their much loved and much needed ABC.

This bill will achieve nothing, because what the ABC needs is funding—not legislative change that introduces more bureaucracy, but funding. The ABC needs funding not just to meet the needs of growing populations in regional and rural areas but because these areas have been targeted by funding cuts. Those on the other side don't like to be reminded of the fact that since 2013 the Liberals have cut a staggering \$366 million from the ABC, completely in breach of an election promise. Who can forget Tony Abbott's promise, on the eve of the 2013 election that, 'there will be no cuts to the ABC'? Maybe those on the other side have forgotten but Labor has not, the Australian people have not and the rural and regional communities who are struggling to have their voices heard, and their stories told, have definitely not forgotten that.

In 2014 the Liberals cut \$254 million from the ABC. In 2016 the Liberals cut a further \$28 million. In 2018 they announced a further \$83.7 million in ABC cuts with a freeze on indexation. And they're still at it. The Prime Minister's latest budget locks in these \$83.7 million of cuts over three years. Where will it end, I ask. Privatisation, for example? We know that the Liberals are thinking about it. In June 2018, the Liberal Federal Council voted to privatise the ABC. The motion said that the 'federal council calls for the full privatisation of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation'. Again, where will it end?

These cuts come with a cost. That cost is to jobs and to communities. The ABC has been forced to cut 800 jobs since the slashing began to free up funds to continue investing in the Australian content, educational resources and regional communities, as it is required to do under its charter. Simply injecting words such as 'regional and rural Australia' into legislation does not ensure that our ABC's adequately resourced to deliver. The final report of the ACCC digital platforms inquiry, in June this year, examined ABC funding and found that 'the public broadcasters are not currently resourced to fully compensate for the decline in local reporting previously produced by traditional commercial publishers', and recommended that 'stable and adequate funding' be provided to the ABC and SBS. Is it any wonder that, since 2014, a total of 800 ABC staff have lost their jobs? The Australia Network has been axed. Short-wave radio has been shut down. The number of hours of ABC factual programming has dropped by 60 per cent. The number of hours of programming of drama has dropped by 20 per cent. The number of hours of documentaries has dropped by 13.5 per cent.

I want to talk specifically now about the cuts to the ABC that have had a direct impact on my electorate of Shortland. I must say, Shortland is still serviced by ABC television and radio. The sad thing is that it is not as well serviced as it used to be. This is not a reflection on the hardworking staff there or the equally committed management. It is just a result of having to do more with less—more because audiences demand it. The major impact of those horror 2014 cuts was on ABC 1233 Newcastle, which covers the entire Hunter region, which was downgraded from a metropolitan station to a regional one. What did that mean? Overnight one-quarter of the staff at ABC Newcastle lost their jobs—one in four! This has, obviously, had a major impact on the employees who are left, who are expected to do the same, if not more, work with less resources. The staff left are doing their best to deliver news across all platforms that today's audiences demand, but they're making do with much less. I raised this issue in the House in 2014:

Because of their budget cuts, we will lose Helen Clare, Carol Duncan and their teams who produce quality radio shows that speak to and about our community. Most importantly, our community will suffer because this will have an impact on the station's ability to provide emergency coverage.

Nobody from Newcastle, Lake Macquarie or the Central Coast will forget the devastating bushfires that ravaged our region in October 2013. In my electorate, families were evacuated and traffic diversions were put in place. It was the local ABC radio that kept us informed of where evacuation centres were, when it was safe to return home and what the impact was on our environment and on our towns. It was the local ABC radio that provided a space for the outpouring of community spirit. They harnessed the generosity of the people that live in the Hunter and the Central Coast and helped coordinate donations for those who'd been forced to flee their homes and who had lost so much.

It is in times of disaster that we see the best of our communities, and 1233 ABC Newcastle is a vital part of ours. To see it gutted was devastating. This government hurt the people of the Hunter region and it should be ashamed. Those opposite made a solemn election-eve promise of no cuts to the ABC, but it's the people of the Hunter and the Central Coast and the great services of 1233 ABC that suffer because of this lie. We know how bitterly disappointed the staff were at the time and how bitterly disappointed our community was. The loss of our two local programs was devastating for our community. Regional and rural communities struggle to have their stories heard. With fewer local programs focused on regional and rural areas, fewer local stories are told. It was a sad day for our community. It was a dark day for our community.

The ABC is not just a broadcasting service. It is an institution. The ABC can always be relied on to promote and defend the Hunter's and Central Coast's interests in times of crisis, including natural disaster. It plays the role of emergency broadcaster, and that is so vital, as we have seen with the current bushfires. Due to climate change, we have seen the bushfire season starting earlier, lasting longer and being more severe. We need more funding for the ABC in that context, not less.

The ABC matters to Australians. Before the last election, more than 107,000 Australians signed up to Labor's petition to protect public broadcasting, making it our third-highest-ranking petition. Since that election, we've seen further closures of commercial radio newsrooms—WIN in Orange, Dubbo, Albury, Wagga Wagga and Wide Bay. Regional media is struggling. The ABC must be there for those communities. Sadly, many Australians have felt the loss of local reporting in their communities. It manifests in many ways. For example, the decision by ABC Grandstand to axe Craig Hamilton from the Rugby League broadcast is a disgrace. It means that Newcastle has lost its local voice of Rugby League. A sportscaster that has served our community for over 20 years has been lost, no doubt due to the funding pressures and the pressure on the ABC to streamline services. In fact, they said the reason for making the decision was that they needed a uniform approach across Rugby League broadcasting. I would submit that budget pressures have clearly played a role in that.

As I said, the ACCC completed a major inquiry, which found that the public broadcasters are not properly resourced. The government needs a real plan to address the decline in local news in rural and regional Australia. The government should put its money where its mouth is, stop cutting the ABC and start providing stable and adequate funding to the ABC for local news in rural and regional Australia. Cutting the ABC and meddling with the ABC Act and Charter isn't going to improve service provision in rural and regional Australia, but funding the ABC properly will.

The Liberals and Nationals are crying crocodile tears just as, at the same time, they're cutting \$83.7 million from the ABC. They've introduced a bill that will cost the ABC hundreds of thousands in taxpayer dollars on more bureaucracy and red tape. Labor took a policy to the last federal election to reverse the government's ABC budget cuts and commit an additional \$10 million over three years for ABC local and regional media and emergency broadcasting. The government needs to put its money where its mouth is. In 2018 the Liberal Federal Council voted to privatise the ABC. Without additional ABC funding, it's obvious this bill forms part of a plan to privatise the ABC by stealth and by a thousand cuts. Labor will not stand for it. The Australian people will not stand for it. The government needs to stop its window-dressing with bills such as this, stop the cuts to the ABC and start properly resourcing the ABC to support our rural and regional communities.